

The First Director:

MICHAEL PREECE

Talks about the *Falcon Crest* Première and Other Memories

Interview by

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I sent Michael Preece, who directed ten episodes of *Falcon Crest*, particularly the series première, a request for an interview via e-mail, and he replied immediately so we scheduled a phone conversation for July 31, 2009.



He has been one of the most successful directors of U.S. TV shows for more than 30 years. His directing credits include many hit series from the 1970's, '80's and '90's, such as *The Streets of San Francisco*, *Knots Landing*, *Fantasy Island*, *Flamingo Road*, *Trapper John, M.D.*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *T.J. Hooker*, *Riptide*, *Stingray*, *Jake and the Fatman*, *MacGyver*, *Hunter*, *Renegade*, *Seventh Heaven* and *Walker, Texas Ranger* as well as — last but not least — *Dallas*.

Getting to Work on *Falcon Crest*

Michael stepped right into the middle of how much he enjoyed working on *Falcon Crest*, particularly with Jane Wyman. He said she wanted him to direct more often, but he was extremely busy with *Dallas*: "I had to go to Jane Wyman and tell her that I couldn't work on the show." He left no doubt that directing *Dallas* did not leave much room for anything else because he directed approximately 70 episodes of the series. But he enjoyed doing an episode of *Falcon Crest* from time to time.

"So how did you get your first assignment for *Falcon Crest*, the first episode, *In His Father's House*?" I asked.

"Well, I was working for Quinn Martin's company", Michael started.

"Oh, the company that produced *The Streets of San Francisco*," I spontaneously said — *Quinn Martin Productions* was one of the biggest supplier of crime dramas and action oriented series in the 1970's.

"That's where I started directing," Michael referred to "*The Streets*" — previously, he had worked as a script supervisor. "Then some of the people left *Quinn Martin* and went to *Lorimar*, and through my reputation, I guess, I started doing *Lorimar* shows." Michael also explained that the original unit production manager on *Falcon Crest*, Dick Gallegly, was one of the people who had worked at *Quinn Martin Productions* with him and that he probably recommended him to *Lorimar*.

"I didn't know what I was getting into!" Michael said when he remembered how he was asked to come to the Wine Country in Northern California to start working on *Falcon Crest* and shoot a couple of episodes there. "I didn't know any of the cast, I didn't know Earl Hamner," Michael said about the time when he started on the show. So everything and everybody was new to him.

From the Première to the Series

"As you might know, there was a predecessor of the series, which was entitled *The Vintage Years*. *Lorimar* and CBS decided not to air it, but to remodel it into what later became *Falcon Crest*. As a preparation for your first assignment, did you watch it?" I asked.

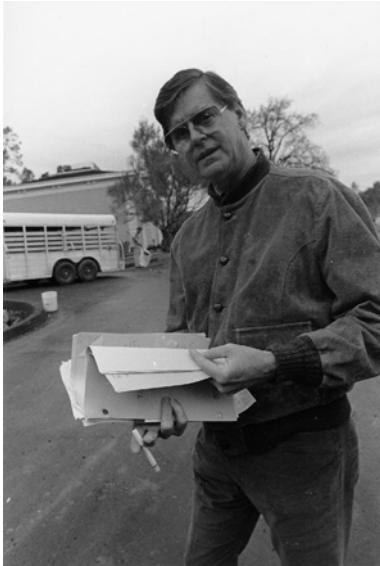


Michael immediately came to speak about Clu Gulager and Samantha Eggar, who originally played Chase and Maggie: "They [*Lorimar*] showed me the show [*The Vintage Years*], and I said: 'Why are you re-casting?' The reason I heard was: Clu Gulager looked like he belonged there — a down-home guy. And Samantha Eggar, being British, she looked more like a frontier woman."

Clu Gulager in a scene with Jane Wyman in *The Vintage Years* (1981).

Michael explained that the creative forces of the series and the production company wanted people, who created the visual impact of coming to the wine country as total strangers, which was the original idea of the show — particularly Chase quitting his job as a pilot in order to become a vineyardist. Michael continued to explain that they wanted to establish the idea "the whole family had no idea about farming. So that, I think, was the main reason why they re-shot the pilot."

"So did you have anything to do with the changes that were made, or was the process of revamping *The Vintage Years* and turning it into *Falcon Crest* just the job the writing staff and the producers had to perform?" I asked.



"I think that was entirely Earl Hamner and his writers. I was a hired hand and read the script," Michael laughed.

Earl Hamner with the script of *The Vintage Years* near the *Spring Mountain Winery Building*.

That brought me to my next question: "TV shows being episodic assignments, directors are usually not provided with a broad perspective of the overall concept by the show's regime — sometimes with the exception of those directors being rehired several times within a season or over the entire run of the series. You were one of these privileged directors, who had assignments for various episodes, particularly in the first year. From that perspective, how much creative input did you as the director have in season 1?"

"I didn't know where they were heading, and I am not sure that they did," the director pointed out that he was only provided with scripts from episode to episode and emphasized that the storylines of the first season were not carved in stone, but that the producers played around with several ideas and many alternatives.

As one example, he named a love interest for Angela: "They were always trying to find a



suitable person for Jane Wyman. You know they ended up with Mel Ferrer, but they went through several men. She had Stephen Elliott for one episode or maybe two, Dana Andrews for one or two. And Jane would say: 'No, I don't see myself with that kind of man.'"

Stephen Elliott and Jane Wyman in a restaurant scene in episode 2.

He left no doubt Mel Ferrer was a choice as an attorney and escort for Angela Jane was happy with because he was handsome.



Jane Wyman and Mel Ferrer in the wedding scene in episode 68.

He remembered a funny moment after Jane Wyman and Stephen Elliott had filmed their first scene together: "Jane came to me: 'I am not even going to hold hands with this guy!'" Michael said she wanted to have a partner she could be seen with, not an overweight guy — although Stephen Elliott was a great actor.

As far as Dana Andrews was concerned, his various health problems prevented that the show made more use of him. He had a skin disease so certain parts of his skin had to be covered with make-up, as Michael pointed out. "Jane Wyman said: 'I'm not going to kiss him!'" But what Jane

Wyman concerned more was that Dana Andrews did not remember his lines very well due to his health status — she simply demanded professionalism.



Dana Andrews in a scene in episode 13 (left) and in a hospital scene in episode 34 with Jane Wyman.

Her professionalism was what she also expected from everybody else on the set. "Jane Wyman was the most professional actress I ever worked with. She never left the set. She had a little corner so she would sit in her chair — and an apple box and her cigarettes and a glass of water. She was kind of a philosopher. Wonderful!" He left no doubt how devoted she was to the show.

"The very first day of shooting up in Napa... There was another director, Jack Bender. I was doing the first episode, and he was doing the second one. The days were supposed to be split in half," Michael referred to the first seven episodes in season 1 that were filmed in the Wine Country. "One person would shoot until lunch time, and the other person would take all the shoots in the afternoon. On the first day, this other director shot until 4 o'clock in the afternoon." Michael explained that the first scene he had to shoot was when the Giobertis first arrived in the Tuscany Valley. After Jack Bender had taken so long for his segments, "I said: 'Nobody can sit down because I've got like two and a half hours to shoot five hours' work. So nobody goes to their dressing room or to the bathroom. We have to shoot fast to get this done.'" It took him only two hours to get it in the can in the end. "So then I became Jane's favorite," Michael said proudly, "because she loved the fact of a kind of a no-nonsense thing going on."

His other memories of shooting the first episode included a funny story about the angles Jane Wyman and Susan Sullivan wanted to be filmed in a scene they had together. "Susan Sullivan said: 'My best side is my left side.' And Jane Wyman said: 'My best side is my left side.'" Michael had to tell them they had to look at each other... So somebody had to lose. It was Susan Sullivan, of course.

I figured he referred to the conversation in front of the *Falcon Crest Victorian Mansion* when Angela and Maggie talked about Chase's idea to possibly move to the Tuscany Valley and start a new life as a vineyardist.

Memorable Moments

We also spoke about other memorable moments of Michael's work on the wine-oriented drama.

"I noticed that you directed two episodes with Brad Harris as a guest star: *The Avenger* (episode 67 <3.27>) and *Missing Links* (episode 199 <8.16>)," I said. "He played John Duffy, a Tuscany Valley deputy. Did you have a hand in casting him?"

"Brad Harris has been a friend of mine since 1958. I met him in Germany. I was working on a television show out of Munich in a town called Geiseltal. And then I found out he lived in Santa Monica, and I lived in Los Angeles. Off and on through the years, we would go out to the gym together — he is a big bodybuilder. Wednesday this week, I had lunch with him. Anyway, I got him that job," Michael confirmed.



Brad Harris as Deputy John Duffy in episode 67 (left), in episode 199 with Rod Taylor (middle) and finally at a private tennis match with Michael Preece.

"In *Retribution* (episode 87 <4.19>), you played one of Gustav Riebmann's (Paul Freeman) henchmen. How was it that you were hired as an actor? You were not the director of that episode."



"No, it was Barbara Peeters. I didn't know her very well, but she came to me," Michael explained how she offered the part of the henchman to him during the time when he was shooting the preceding episode, *The Showdown* (episode 86 <4.18>), and while she was prepping for *Retribution*. "I said: 'Sure!' It was just... like fun for her! I always kind of avoided that because it is somebody putting out of work," he referred to the fact that the part would have been

played by a professional actor. "A stuntman could have done it, but she kind of insisted."

"You already mentioned that the reason you did not work on the show more often was basically *Dallas* where you had a lot more assignments. After your last episode of *Falcon Crest* in the 1984-85 season, however, you came back in 1989 to direct *Missing Links* (episode 199 <8.16>)."

Michael confirmed that *Dallas* was the main reason, but that he also had many recurring assignments for *Hunter* and *MacGyver* during these years. "Then, they [the *Falcon Crest* producers] were supposed to make the 200th episode. Jane Wyman said she would like me to do it because I did the first episode." So Michael was hired to shoot *Missing Links*, which he also remembered well for the many nights they needed to film the rescue scene at the well with Rod Taylor on the backlot of *CBS - MTM Studios* (now *CBS Studio Center*). It remained a mystery what exactly happened — whether it was a misunderstanding, a change of storylines or whatever, but, as Michael pointed out, "they found out later it was either the 199th or the 201st episode." Anyway, he was glad to direct it, and he was also a guest at the 200th episode party at the *Four Seasons Hotel* in Los Angeles.

"After being absent for approximately four years, was it difficult for you to find your way back to the series? I mean how did you get the necessary background information about what had happened in the previous seasons?" I asked.

Michael answered he read approximately the last ten scripts before he directed episode 199. "By that time, you know, a lot of the writers and the people had changed. I think they tried to go different ways with it."

"So was the atmosphere on the set a lot different compared to the previous years?" I asked.

"I noticed that they had formed groups," he confirmed and described that some of the original cast members were sitting together when they were waiting for the next scene or anything else on the set, for example, and some others, like Lorenzo, went to their dressing rooms. "The new cast had a different set of chairs somewhere else." There were no arguments between them, however. He also said that people did not like Michael Fierman, the executive producer who came back in season 8; particularly the crew felt he was a complainer, as the director had heard.

From the perspective of the plot, he thought that with everybody growing older, it became less interesting because teenage kids on a show, in contrast, offer a certain field for conflicts; it was also difficult to focus on the wine issue for a long time because the usual agricultural steps in growing wine are not of great interest to the audience. "It's not such an exciting business!" the director said.

Speaking of changes in the plot also brought us to an earlier example that focused on things without any connection the wine country: Michael thought the Nazi treasure storyline in season 4 was sort of inappropriate for a series dealing with wine growers in a rural area: "That was pretty far-fetched for me," he said.

Unfortunately, he did not know any details about the original plans for that storyline that was discontinued so abruptly mid-season 4. The only thing he could recall was that there was a very bright and sharp assistant director on *Falcon Crest* at that time, who also criticized the storyline with the Nazi treasure — Paul Sirmons, who is now the Film Commissioner of Florida.



Michael's favorite scene is when the Giobertis arrived at their house in the first episode. "They drive up in their station wagon, and we made a lot of jokes about: 'Where is the furniture?!'" Michael liked the reactions of the Gioberti family when they first saw the Gioberti House, particularly Billy Moses' reaction — Cole's realizing how old and run-down the rock-solid house was.

Keeping Contact and His Memorabilia

Among the people Michael had kept in contact with was Jane Wyman until she died. He also attended director Harry Harris' funeral where he met many of the cast and crew members, including Susan Sullivan, Margaret Ladd, David Selby and Earl Hamner.

As far as memorabilia are concerned, Michael treasures his *Falcon Crest* plaque: "They gave us that plaque at the end of — I guess — the first season. It is a wooden shield, about two feet wide, two feet long." From his description, it is a replica of the coat of arms as the one on the wall in Julia's lab at the *Falcon Crest Winery Building* in the early seasons. Michael also has some *Falcon Crest* coffee cups.

He donated his scripts to the *University of California at Los Angeles* for research in drama classes.

Current Projects

When we came towards the end of our chat, I asked Michael about his current projects.

He is quite busy right now. One big thing going on in his career is *Trauma*, a pilot for a new *NBC* drama series about paramedics — shot entirely in San Francisco. Another project is the interesting challenge of directing a set of 10-minute theater plays in Palm Springs.

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